

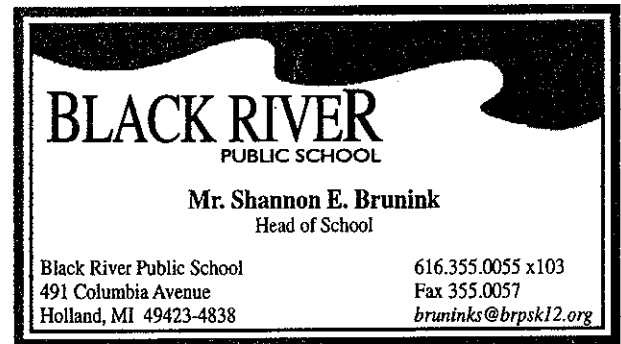


# BLACK RIVER

PUBLIC SCHOOL

September 21, 2011

The Honorable Senator Phil Pavlov  
Senate Education Committee  
905 Farnum Building  
P.O. Box 30036  
Lansing, MI 48909-7536



Re: Black River Public School and Charter School Legislation

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Black River Public School, located in Holland, is a kindergarten through twelfth grade charter school with a focus on college preparation at all levels. In its sixteenth year of operation, the school boasts small class sizes with an average of 20 students per classroom and innovative delivery of a brand of education that has been recognized at the local, state and national levels. Black River's school mission, which is summarized in the statement "Preparing students for college and life", has remained the school's consistent guiding principle through all its years of operation. The words of Black River's mission statement have been given substance by the work and accomplishments of both students and teachers.

Through our challenging integrated curriculum, commitment to small class sizes and focus on experiential education, students at Black River Public School have shown incredible achievement in all areas. Whether the students are compared locally in the West Michigan area or across the state, our students perform well above average on tests like the MEAP and the ACT, where our students averaged 23.7 (state average is 20.0). In this same vein, the school has been applauded since 2006 as a top high school by publications like *Newsweek*, and in 2011 *The Washington Post* recognized Black River as the number one school in the state based on its capstone Advanced Placement program. This is an impressive feat for a school whose student body is selected randomly and whose special education enrollment percentage is actually a bit larger than some of the local traditional public school districts.

With all of the challenges the state places on schools and children, Black River has continued to emphasize its culture of college preparation. In this regard, the class of 2011 had a new requirement to complete in order to graduate. Starting in 2011, all seniors must be accepted into a four year college or university in order to earn a Black River diploma. In the first year of the requirement every senior accomplished this goal. Impressively, this number included the students who received special education services. We are tremendously proud of this accomplishment and, as shown by our current wait list of 224 students, it is clear that our parents and students desire the rigorous academic requirements we have instituted.

With all that is going so well at Black River there are still difficult issues that we struggle with each day. At the top of this list are our facilities. We grew and saved our money over the years until we had the means to add a



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gymnasium/music building. Now, we are in great need of a new elementary school. Our youngest learners are currently crowded into modular structures that have weathered their years fairly well but need replacing. We are without the ability to propose a bond issue to voters, like other public schools can do when they have facility needs. Currently, we are waiting and watching for economic conditions to improve, hoping we can seek donations to help us offset the great cost of a better elementary building.

Millage laws also prevent us from pursuing technology bonds or transportation money in the same way as traditional public schools. While I do not have a solution that would please the neighboring districts, it would seem that millage dollars could be split somehow to accompany students who choose to leave their districts to attend our school. What a great help it would be to see any portion of that money go to the schools the families choose.

A difficult situation that could be easily remedied by a change in the law involves our enrollment process. Currently we are not permitted to give the children of faculty and staff any priority in admission. We have instances of faculty members trying for years to get their children through the lottery; we have also lost faculty whose children could not be given enrollment priority. It only makes sense to offer the same priority to faculty and staff that we are allowed to extend to the siblings of currently enrolled students. We hope you will consider this simple change to charter enrollment laws that would benefit all Michigan charter schools.

As upcoming legislation is debated, please consider the differences between the traditional public schools and charter schools. Many of the issues facing our traditional public schools have already been addressed by charter schools: retirement plans, health insurance, merit pay and streamlined administration come to mind, among others. I ask you to take these differences into consideration because so often in the past charter schools have been disadvantaged by various programs. Edjobs, for instance, would require us to join the expensive MPSERS program. Money that was distributed to schools to bail out MPSERS did not come to charter schools, punishing us for having made the choice to avoid this costly program.

In closing, I appreciate the time you have allowed for input at this hearing and I am excited to have had the opportunity to participate. I urge you to appreciate the great things charter schools are doing for children in Michigan, and to help support the concept of choice by recognizing the innovative work that these schools do.

Black River and charter schools like it yearn to remain innovative and student-focused. Please support us with fair legislation that rewards us for our innovations and successes with the children of Michigan.

Sincerely,



Mr. Shannon E. Brunink

Head of School

Black River Public School